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How the Special Education Service Model Can Be Changed to Support Educator's Individual Strengths

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**HOW THE SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICE MODEL
CAN BE CHANGED TO SUPPORT EDUCATOR'S INDIVIDUAL
STRENGTHS**

**A MASTER'S THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY**

BY

LISA KERMODE

**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTERS OF ART**

NOVEMBER 2023

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**APPROVED
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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on research related to the current state of the special education model and it includes qualitative and quantitative literature, as well as current challenges that exist in the industry today. It will specifically address the following question: Can the current special education service model be structured around strengths-based skilled positions vs. the current job descriptions/roles? This thesis includes research, opinions, and a conclusion to support the above question. The research that was conducted highlights significant challenges that exist today when it comes to hiring and maintaining adequate human resources to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of the current job positions that support special education students.

Many organizations outside of the education industry have taken time and resources to evaluate how to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and strategic outcomes by building cultures that create positions within their organization based on skill sets. Other industries place employees in roles based on strengths, which results in incredible increases in employee engagement, productivity, and therefore stronger growth and outcomes. What if the education industry, specifically special education, made a change to align with this philosophy of strengths-based jobs and fulfillment of roles for the teachers, ultimately to benefit the students? The following research will address this topic directly, and its findings will lead readers to discover the impact both on special education students, as well as the staff who provide services for them, which in turn can help special education students.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Thesis Writer's Experience

This thesis author previously was a global corporate strategic and operational leader. The writer is a current special education teacher working with students in the elementary school setting. Experiences in the corporate environment included defining strategies, aligning people, processes, and outcomes to affect financial and operational change, as well as to improve efficiency. Experience includes certification and experience using strengths-based strategies and techniques to improve employee engagement and productivity to reduce inefficiency and waste.

Background Information

The topic for this thesis will be a Literature review with application emphasis, and it will focus on suggesting a change to the special education service model and job descriptions to be structured around strengths-based skilled positions. This thesis writer will attempt to answer the question; how can the special education service model be changed to support educator's individual strengths?

The current special education staffing model places most special education teachers in roles that require multiple skills and strengths. Current special education roles require that teachers understand and stay up to date on state and federal special education laws, evaluate and assess student abilities, create individual education plans, follow state academic standards for curriculum implementation and assessments, as well as create behavior support plans. Requirements of the special education teacher job include developing and instructing on multiple subjects and curriculums aligned with state academic standards and differentiated instruction. The role also requires monitoring student progress, conducting due process meetings with parents and teams, as well as managing federal paperwork requirements and deadlines.

Organizations have historically led teams and individuals assuming and expecting them to perform all of their roles and responsibilities well, and at the same time, learn how to do things or improve what they do not do well or what they don't enjoy doing. These job and role expectations have proven to reduce employee engagement and productivity, as well as to negatively affect bottom line results in health care, business, education, and many other fields (Lee, 2014). Strengths-based leadership articles identify organizational success aligned with strengths-based cultures which ultimately show high levels of innovation, performance, and employee engagement in high performing organizations (Lee, 2014).

Aligning special education job descriptions and roles to individual strengths is increasingly important to research in this new age of a reduced workforce. A reduced workforce is a result of an increase of baby-boomers retiring with fewer people to fill those jobs, and a pandemic that altered what we do and how we do it in every industry. Recruiting new special education teachers, retaining them, and requiring them to meet and exceed the goals of their roles, has become increasingly difficult for many school districts. This research will review in detail the organizational structures and specific skills currently required of the role, as well as provide ideas of how the education industry can make strengths-based changes to roles. It will also identify the opportunities and challenges of making changes in an industry that has been operating the same way for many years.

In his research, Burkus (2011) explored how elements of organizational design affect the styles of leadership employed within an organization, profiling how organizational structure positions leaders to develop the strengths of their followers. The role of design in organizations includes strategy, structure, and systems. These three elements of organizational design affect how leaders determine the style of leadership they hire and promote. This implies that, in order

to see strengths-based leadership develop among leaders of an organization, it must be built into the design and people (Burkus, 2011). The Peter Principle is described in an article to emulate the concepts of strengths-based leadership and asserts that individuals are most productive when operating within their strengths (Rath & Conchie, 2008). Burkus (2011) also indicated that many organizations are not properly leveraging the strengths of their leaders and followers, indicating that the design of the organization may have hindered leaders from developing leadership styles, and therefore affect the people in the organization. This article used extensive strengths work and dialogue created by Rath and Conchie (2008), who made significant contributions to the strengths-based leadership movement.

Rath and Conchie's (2008) strengths work identified three tenants of strengths-based leadership. First, effective leaders invested in their followers' strengths, while helping them manage their weaknesses. Second, effective leaders built well-rounded teams with required strengths in executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking. Finally, effective leaders understood the needs of followers building trust, hope, and optimism by understanding them. When an organization's leadership has not focused on individual strengths, statistics have shown that employees were less engaged in their work, while when leadership focused on individual strengths, employees were substantially more engaged in their work, and therefore more productive. Burkus (2011) reported about a hospital that faced low employee engagement of 53%, and after moving to a strengths-based leadership approach, raised employee engagement substantially, with improved patient and physician satisfaction and engagement. Finally, the Burkus (2011) research shared grim statistics on the low number of organizations that aligned employee strengths with roles, that continued to lead, and tried to engage employees to improve performance by fixing their weaknesses (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

Additional research conducted in 2020 by experts in China focused on strengths-based leadership and its impact on task performance, claiming that it contributed to advancing strengths-based leadership theory and research. The goal of this study was to bridge the gaps in previous literature that failed to prove a relationship between strengths-based leadership on employee tasks and organization outcomes (Ding et al., 2020). Ding et al. (2020) first summarized various definitions of strengths-based leadership and culture identified in previous literature, concluding with a definition described as “individual inner characteristics and external resources or conditions in a specific situation, which can help employees to achieve near-perfect performance, growth, and development” (p. 2). Included in the study was a cross-sectional research design that linked strengths-based leadership to task performance and work-related well-being (Ding et al., 2020).

The results of the above research showed that promoting employees’ task performance and research on strengths-based leadership provided a new insight into leadership development (Ding et al., 2020). Based on the results of the study, these researchers proposed that organizations train and promote leaders who had the desire and ability to identify, develop, and use their own strengths and subordinates’ strengths (Ding et al., 2020). Limitations of this study included a lack of using a systematic process to develop a strengths-based leadership scale, as well as understanding if the scale developed in the Chinese context would work in other cultures. Additionally, the study did not include various job levels or use of an objective peer-reviewed scale to evaluate performance (Ding et al., 2020).

Wolf (2018) articulated how special education teachers are expected to fulfill diverse teaching and non-teaching tasks in comparison to their general education peers. They were expected to competently demonstrate specialized expertise that aligned with the professional

knowledge, skills, and practices developed and endorsed by recognized scholars and practitioners (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015). In addition, certain skill domains were identified as essential for special education teacher effectiveness (Wolf, 2018). It also included expectations to competently develop and teach subject matter content to students, as well as accommodating students' unique learning needs (Leko et al., 2015). Finally, special education teachers were also required to understand and manage due process requirements of the federal and state governments to comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA).

The researchers in Wolf's (2018) work performed a qualitative analysis that surveyed special education teachers across roughly 5,000 schools to understand what skills they thought were critical for them to be effective in their jobs. After analyzing all participants' responses, three major skill domains emerged as critical for special education teacher effectiveness. These skills included: understanding disability and other impacts on learning, as well as their dispositions toward children, integrated expertise, and instructional flexibility (Wolf, 2018). Technical skills traditionally associated with special education teacher expertise were not represented in the study's responses. For example, participants did not identify screening, placement, or assessment skills, early intervention and family-school partnership practices, or skills related to applied behavior analysis. In addition, the study did not include consistent and direct reference to the development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), inclusion, and collaboration (Wolf, 2018). The researchers concluded that these outcomes could be used to ensure that the measures used to evaluate special educators reflect the specialized expertise expected of them (Wolf, 2018).

The above three articles provide initial ideas to consider as the thesis author answers the guided research question that asks how the special educator's service model can be changed to

support individual strengths. Burkus (2011) and Ding's (2020) studies provided historical research and findings of how strengths-based leadership has been defined and integrated into organizations, while Wolf's (2018) research provided what special education teachers identified as the most important skills required for success of the job. What is not identified in the studies noted above are current job descriptions aligned with special education roles, as well as whether the education community can accept and adopt a change as significant as this study implies. Additionally, these studies do not include an understanding of the current state of special education hiring practices and availability of resources to fill the roles today, which will be important to form an informed conclusion related to the guided research question.

The guided research question aligned with this thesis asks how the special education service model can be changed to support the individual strengths of educators. The research will first provide background on the definitions, theories and outcomes related to strengths-based leadership and cultures, which have been defined in many ways. It will also identify how strengths-based leadership theories could align with the special education service model, and provide an overview of the current skills required by special education teachers to support students. Required and desired skills will be aligned with strengths-based strategies and delivery of academic and administrative requirements of the role. Finally, this thesis will provide a conclusion based on the related qualitative and quantitative research to determine whether the special education community is ready and willing to understand and implement changes required to capitalize on the opportunities identified.

Thesis Question

How can the special education service model be changed to support educator's individual strengths?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Information Gathering Process

A literature review was conducted using mixed methods including qualitative and quantitative information captured from scholars, federal and state governments, special education educators, psychologists, administrators, school and district websites, and the Bethel library resources. Literature reviewed the current state of the education industry using qualitative methods of strengths-based leadership operations, as well as a review of change management methods and strategic theories that may impact outcomes of special education's ability to make major changes to the existing structure of the special education service model. Final written results of this research include advantages and disadvantages of changing the service model to support individual strengths of special educators.

Current State of the Education Industry - Qualitative Research

A report was created by the United States Department of Education in May 2023 that researched and reported on the challenges and strategies that schools are having recovering from the pandemic. The report identified how schools are finding it difficult or unable to fill open teaching positions. It compared the number of open teaching positions in 2011-12 compared to 2020-21, showing the percentages of public and private elementary and secondary schools by teaching subject-matter field that were hiring for at least one open teaching position. The report tallied the number of employers that found it very difficult, or were not able to fill, open teaching roles (Irwin et al., 2023).

Results of the report indicated the following percentages of schools that found it very difficult to fill or were not able to fill open special education teaching positions. The results also

display the changes from the survey reporting periods of 2011 - 2012 compared to 2020 - 2021

(Irwin et al., 2023):

	Public Schools 2011-12	Public Schools 2020-21	Inc/ (Dec) %	Private Schools 2011-12	Private Schools 2020-21	Inc/ (Dec) %
Percentage of special education positions very difficult to fill or unable to fill.	17%	40%	135%	15%	44%	193%

The above comparable results indicate that there is a statistically significant need for schools to establish a plan to ensure that the role of special education teachers is considered for the future. With open positions doubling in ten years, schools and the state will need to determine what will motivate people to explore the roles and responsibilities of the positions.

Frontline Education (Simbajon, 2023) identified that the top reasons why special education teachers quit are as follows (p. 2 - 6):

- Unrelenting paperwork - More than half of a special education teacher's workday is related to paperwork.
- Behavior and discipline issues - Managing classroom behavior is crucial to being an effective teacher and it becomes more difficult to teach effectively with excessive behaviors and limited resources.
- Regulation changes - Tight changes from state and federal regulations cause stress that takes away from teaching curriculum and effective classroom management.

Current State of the Education Industry - Quantitative Research Methods

A review and analysis was conducted in 2023 to identify the current scope of the impact of changing special education job descriptions and role requirements. The review included search and review of special education job descriptions and the number of open positions across 104 public charter schools and public school districts using school human resource employment sites in the state of Minnesota.

Data Analysis

To address the research question in this thesis related to identifying the current state of special education teacher job descriptions and talent requirements across the state of Minnesota, data was collected and documented on a spreadsheet with summarized results. The number of open special education positions was captured and tallied to support the rationale for reviewing this challenge aligned with a reduced workforce to fill positions. Additionally, job description role requirements were tallied to best understand the current state of role requirements that exist for special education teachers today.

Quantitative Findings

A review was conducted of 104 Minnesota public charter schools and public school districts including a total of 1,644 schools (56% of total Minnesota schools), supporting 603,465 students (72% of the total student population in Minnesota). School websites were analyzed to determine the magnitude of open special education positions during the period from June 26, 2023 and July 24, 2023. Results indicated that in 56% of Minnesota schools analyzed, there were 476.5 open and unfilled special education teacher positions, including roles in early childhood, elementary, middle school, high school, transition, and online education.

Further analysis of the special education job descriptions across schools identified that 99 of the charter schools and public school districts (95%) continue to require that special education teachers perform the following multiple roles to succeed in the position:

Special Education Job Description Requirements:
Understand and stay up to date on state and federal special education laws.
Evaluate and assess student abilities and behaviors.
Create individual education plans and behavior support plans.
Understand, develop and teach multiple academic and behavior subjects and curriculums with differentiated instruction.
Monitor and report student progress multiple times per year.
Conduct due process meetings with parents and teams, while being available to address questions and concerns from parents and teammates throughout the school day.
Manage federal paperwork requirements and deadlines.

In addition to the above noted required skills needed for the special education teacher role, the unfilled special education roles depicted the requirement of teachers to maintain current knowledge of best practices in research-based curriculum and methods of teaching, professional development, classroom management, and technology. Special education teachers are also expected to be observed and to conduct other duties, as defined by the school principal. It was noted that 5 of charter schools or districts (less than 5%) currently employ due process coordinators or case managers to assist special education teachers with scheduling meetings and due process paperwork required by the state of Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023).

Current State of the Education Industry - Qualitative Findings

The Minnesota Department of Education (2023) shared expectations that teachers provide person-centered practices for children with disabilities that focus on interests, needs, strengths, and dreams. It was noted that person-centered practices empower individuals to make informed choices about where they will learn, work, live and play. The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) identified that the Individual Education Plan (IEP) outlines the unique needs of the student and the specialized goals and objectives that will help the student make educational progress. (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023). What the Minnesota Department of Education does not explicitly document or require of Minnesota schools is that one person or teacher provides each student with the benefits of free and fair academic support required of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children. The IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 7.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities (United States Department of Education, 2023).

Gallup's 2023 research and report on the global workplace provided extensive detail and summarized that by switching to proven, science-based management, organizations could change the course of the economy (Gallup, 2023). The research indicated that low employee engagement costs the global economy \$8.8 trillion. Poor management leads to lost customers and lost profits, but it also leads to miserable lives. Gallup's research into wellbeing at work finds that having a job you hate is worse than being unemployed (Gallup, 2023). Gallup suggested that leaders

should focus on their most winnable employees, stating that nearly six in ten employees are quietly quitting, but they are likely to become engaged with a few changes to their workplace. Gallup also suggested that organizations should provide better managers that appreciate and engage employees in their strengths (Gallup, 2023).

Additional global research findings indicated that employees in the United States and Canada expressed the highest regional percentage of daily stress (tied with East Asia), as well as the highest regional percentage of female employees who experience high daily stress in their jobs. Employees in the United States and Canada reported that 31% are engaged in their work and 47% have an intent to leave their job (Gallup, 2023). These results are closely aligned with Frontline Education's (2023) survey results that indicated that as many as 40% of teachers experience burnout, and burnout negatively impacts Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals.

Strengths Based Organizations

Application of a strengths-based organization requires leadership to fully embrace the concept and to understand the impact. Buckingham (2007) made it clear in his research that the radical idea at the core of the strength movement was that excellence is not the opposite of failure, and that, as such, you will learn little about excellence from studying failure (p. 3). This means that asking or requiring people to move their weaknesses to strengths needs to be non-existence in an organization. Additionally, leading with strengths requires a new standard language to be applied across organizations to ensure that all leaders and employees are aligned with strengths-based roles and tasks. Buckingham (2007) identified a 6-step discipline for organizations to implement the change required for organizations and individuals to put strengths to work, as follows (p. 19-29):

Step 1 - Bust the Myths:	You will succeed in putting your strengths to work only if you believe that capitalizing on your strengths is the best way to compete. Move beyond the myth that fixing weaknesses is the best way to achieve best performance.
Step 2 - Get Clear	Strengths are defined as consistent, near-perfect performance. They are specific activities which a person does well and enjoys doing.
Step 3 - Free Your Strengths	Most conversations at work do not concern your strengths, so volunteer strengths to a leader or a team.
Step 4 - Stop Your Weaknesses	Navigate away from activities that weaken a person.
Step 5 - Speak Up	Master the art of talking about strengths without bragging and weaknesses without whining.
Step 6 - Build Strong Habits	Stay clear-headed to build the right habits, staying in control, always pushing toward activities that strengthen a person.

Identifying Individual Strengths

Working with one's strengths requires the identification, understanding, and use of talent. Identifying individual strengths can be intuitive or it can be conducted using professional tools, such as the Clifton Strength-Finder tool (Rath, 2007). Additionally, Bakker and van Woerkom (2018) identified that to encourage the use and development of strengths, workers may be challenged to design a small experiment, for example, by using one of their strengths as a tool for coping with a difficult or demanding task, or by expanding the application of a specific strength in their daily work.

Welch et al. (2014), conducted qualitative research with six expert experienced strengths coaches to provide insights about how to best utilize the strengths-based approach. Four themes arose from the study and included the following: Theme 1: Strength development is intrinsically motivating and energizing; Theme 2: Strengths develop through relationships; Theme 3: Expert strengths work does not ignore a leader's blind spots or shadow side; Theme 4: Helping leaders develop hinges on a coach's attitudes about his or her own development (Welch et al., 2014, p. 30).

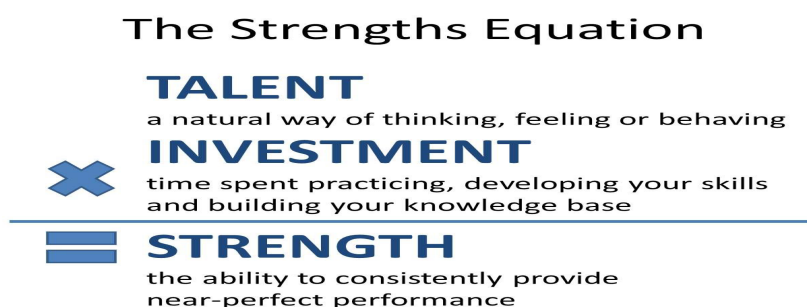
In addition to the above referenced research, Lockman et al. (2019) conducted a research study to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of a strengths-based leadership program for professional women. Linley (2008), was quoted in the article defining a strength as "a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development, and performance" (p. 25). This study was conducted to identify if strengths-based leadership and coaching was an effective approach to leadership development to help individuals identify, harness, and leverage their strengths to achieve professional and personal goals.

The results of the study found that confidence can be acquired to close confidence gaps in working women using strengths-based theories. Researchers noted that support of women's leadership development is critical to increasing self-confidence and providing the opportunities, resources, experiences, and social connections necessary to achieve their professional goals (Lockman et al., (2019). This research is relevant as the teaching workforce has historically been predominantly female.

Bakker and van Woerkom (2018) wrote about how leaders can help employees to play to their strengths to stay engaged and achieve work-related goals. Rath (2007) shared Gallup

scientific research noting the historically quoted phrase revolving around fixing people's weaknesses: "You can be anything you want to be, if you try hard enough" (p. 5), identifying that society's relentless focus on people's shortcomings had turned into a global obsession. Gallup's 40-year study of human strengths identified that knowledge, skills, and practice are important parts of the strengths equation promoting satisfaction of people. With that information, they created a language of the 34 most common talents and developed the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment to help people discover their talents (Rath, 2007). Rath (2007) shared that the research suggested that having someone at work who regularly focuses on strengths can make a dramatic difference, which led them to explore and help to refine perspectives of employers to change how they think and lead. Further research of outcomes suggested for organizations to support people and growth as follows: "You cannot be anything you want to be - but you can be a lot more of who you already are" (Rath, 2007, p. 9).

Rath (2007) summarized Gallup's solution for capturing best possible strengths as follows (p. 20):



Implementation of the Clifton Strengthsfinder assessment involves purchase of assessments and providing employees with optimal time to take the 20-minute assessment, as well as additional time to receive training on how to understand and apply the summary results that are provided (Rath, 2007). Implementation also requires that organizations provide

leadership with appropriate training and guidance so that people have the opportunity to practice using their strengths and can adapt to the changes in the organization throughout the process.

The Clifton StrengthFinders approach identifies four strengths domains, including:

Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building, and Strategic Thinking (Rath, (2007). Each of the four domains identify nine to ten different strength themes. The StrengthsFinder assessment themes and domain results provide people with a descriptor related to their natural talents and what they enjoy most, as follows (p. 37-171):

Domain	Theme	Strengths Characteristics
Executing	Achiever	Constant need for achievement
Executing	Arranger	Manage and align many variables
Executing	Belief	Value responsibility and high ethics
Executing	Consistency	Treat people the same and with consistency
Executing	Deliberative	Careful, vigilant, and private
Executing	Discipline	Need for predictable order and planning
Executing	Focus	Need a clear destination
Executing	Responsibility	Take psychological ownership for commitments
Executing	Restorative	Love to solve problems
Influencing	Activator	Impatient for action and get things started
Influencing	Command	Comfortable imposing views on others
Influencing	Communication	Likes to explain, describe, host, and speak in public
Influencing	Competition	Rooted in comparison of other's performance
Influencing	Maximizer	Transforming something strong into superb
Influencing	Self-Assurance	Faith in own strengths and confident
Influencing	Significance	Want to be significant in the eyes of other people
Influencing	Woo	Enjoy meeting new people and winning them over

Domain	Theme	Strengths Characteristics
Relationship Building	Adaptability	Live in the moment
Relationship Building	Connectedness	Things happen for a reason
Relationship Building	Developer	See the potential in others
Relationship Building	Empathy	Sense the emotions of others
Relationship Building	Harmony	Look for areas of agreement
Relationship Building	Includer	Include others
Relationship Building	Individualization	Intrigued by the unique qualities of each person
Relationship Building	Positivity	Generous with praise and quick to smile
Relationship Building	Relator	Pulled toward people that are already known
Strategic Thinking	Analytical	Insist on well thought out and sound theories
Strategic Thinking	Context	The present is unstable with competing voices
Strategic Thinking	Futuristic	Fascinated by the future
Strategic Thinking	Ideation	Fascinated by ideas
Strategic Thinking	Input	Inquisitive and collect information
Strategic Thinking	Intellection	Like mental action
Strategic Thinking	Learner	Love to learn
Strategic Thinking	Strategic	Sorts through clutter and can find the best solution

Quantitative findings identified earlier in this thesis can be correlated directly with the most common strengths domains and themes that are needed and used in special education role success. The following table connects 95% of special education teacher job requirements with StrengthFinder domains and themes as follows:

Special Education Job Description Requirements	StrengthsFinder Domains and Themes
Understand and stay up to date on state and federal special education laws.	<p>Domain/s: Executing, Strategic Thinking</p> <p>Theme/s: Deliberative, Responsibility, Focus, Learner</p>
Evaluate and assess student abilities and behaviors.	<p>Domain/s: Strategic Thinking, Relationship Building</p> <p>Theme/s: Strategic, Analytical, Individualization</p>
Create individual education plans and behavior support plans.	<p>Domain/s: Executing, Influencer, Relationship Building, Strategic Thinking</p> <p>Theme/s: Achiever, Arranger, Focus, Responsibility, Restorative, Activator, Communication, Maximizer, Developer, Includer, Individualization, Analytical, Analytical, Learner, Strategic</p>
Understand, develop and teach multiple academic and behavior subjects and curriculums with differentiated instruction.	<p>Domain/s: Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building, Strategic Thinking,</p> <p>Theme/s: Achiever, Arranger, Responsibility, Restorative, Communication, Maximizer, Self-Assurance, Developer, Empathy, Learner, Intellection, Strategic</p>
Monitor and report student progress multiple times per year.	<p>Domain/s: Executing</p> <p>Theme/s: Arranger, Activator, Analytical, Discipline</p>
Conduct due process meetings with parents and teams, while being available to address questions and concerns from parents and teammates throughout the school day.	<p>Domain/s: Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building, Strategic Thinking</p> <p>Theme/s: Arranger, Communication, Woo, Developer, Empathy, Harmony, Positivity, Relator, Input, Strategic</p>
Manage federal paperwork requirements and deadlines.	<p>Domain/s: Executing</p> <p>Theme/s: Achiever, Deliberative, Focus</p>
Other: Adapt to requests of principal and school needs.	<p>Domain/s: Executing, Relationship Building</p> <p>Theme/s: Arranger, Adaptability</p>

Analysis of StrengthsFinder skill and theme requirements for special education teachers broadly identifies the vast base of strengths needed to be successful in the role today.

Applying Strengths - Change Management

The Kübler-Ross Change Curve provides helpful information to understand reactions and feelings in relation to change. It assists people in plotting their individual reactions. As defined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the Change Curve recognizes four stages in our reactions to change (Kubler-Ross, 1969, p. 2):

1. People's first responses are often shock and denial, so it is vital to keep them fully informed about what is happening.
2. Anger and fear often come next. At this stage, handle all of the emotions involved with sensitivity and care.
3. People gradually accept their new situation, however, they will still need time to get used to it.
4. When people are fully committed to the changes, they need help celebrating their successes.

In his research about change management in education, Gayef (2014) compared three types of change in detail without finding a specifically designed solution for the educational community. He concluded that organizational leaders in schools should take steps for change management initiatives for each of the organization's subsystems and should plan and implement the change management process using an integrated and congruent approach (Gayef, 2014).

Segal et al. (1996) conducted research and created the Managing Change model which includes three important elements to change management as follows (p. 59-60):

1. Managing the people-side of change: concerning how, when, and how much to communicate about change within the organization, and psychological issues related to transition.
2. Evaluating the change effort: concerning indicators of a change effort's effectiveness.
3. Managing the organizational side of change: concerning the design and structural issues of systemic and long-term change efforts.

Prosci, Inc. developed the ADKAR change management philosophy which combines scientific principles and a focus on the people-side of change to deliver new programs and processes, identifying five main goals to effectively activate change in an organization as follows (Prosci, 2023, p. 45-49).

- **Awareness** - Ensure everyone in your organization understands the need for change.
- **Desire** - Make your case so that everyone involved wants the change.
- **Knowledge** - Provide the information each person needs on how to accomplish their part of the change process.
- **Ability** - Make sure all employees have the skills and training they need to successfully do their part.
- **Reinforcement** - Continue to work with employees and stakeholders after the change is accomplished, to make sure they stay on top of doing things the new way.

ADKAR's approach to change management focuses on building buy-in from people that will be impacted by changes in an organization, including helping people understand how the change affects them personally (Prosci, 2023).

Challenges of Major Organizational Change

The Harvard Division of Professional Education identified seven reasons why change management strategies fail and how to avoid them (Emerson, 2022). Organizations, like people, are often highly resistant to change, even when they know that it is necessary. Emerson (2022) emphasized that because of this resistance, consequences of poorly-managed organizational transformation can be devastating (p. 1). Seven ways that change management strategies fail and what can be done to prevent them include (p. 4 - 10):

1. Starting with an incomplete or poorly-defined strategy. Leaders often focus on what the change is and why it is necessary.

Solution: Create a comprehensive change management strategy before starting any initiative. Identify areas of resistance and potential problems using a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis to determine long-term goals (p. 5).

2. Following a strategy that is too rigid and inflexible. Not taking note of the environment and the market changes can be detrimental.

Solution: Revisit the strategy plan frequently, both before and after unexpected developments occur (p. 6).

3. Lack of effective communications. Leaders don't communicate often after the initial change management strategy has been announced.

Solution: Create a process that includes ongoing communication to keep employees aware of successes and areas to improve (p. 7).

4. Failing to identify and address resistance. Not understanding and managing the resistance to change and that it is the most common reason why many change initiatives fail.

Solution: Make a strategic and thoughtful assessment of how the change initiative may impact the employees and identify potential resistance from the start of the project (p. 8).

5. Disconnect between strategy and culture. Change initiatives that work against existing culture will likely be more difficult and less likely to succeed.

Solution: Ensure that the change management strategy is grounded in a realistic assessment of the organization's culture and vision (p. 8).

6. Setting unrealistic expectations. Pushing too hard, for too much, and for too quickly, can be a major pitfall.

Solution: Managing expectations, both positive and negative, during a change initiative is as important as managing the change itself. True change takes time and requires realistic time management (p. 9).

7. Not creating and celebrating short wins. Without showing positive progress, regardless of the size, can be detrimental to employee enthusiasm and future progress.

Solution: Communicate and celebrate wins of both short and long-term goals and outcomes (p. 10).

The above identified change management strategies highlight common techniques and challenges to consider for successful execution and outcomes in organizations. These needs and challenges should be strongly considered and discussed when answering the research question that asks whether the special education model can be structured around strengths-based skilled positions.

CHAPTER III: APPLICATION OF RESEARCH

Urgent Need in Special Education

The quantitative and qualitative literature review indicates that there is an urgent need to determine how to fill and maintain special education positions across the state of Minnesota due to the sheer number of open positions documented. It also clearly outlines the expectations of current special education teachers and the skill requirements and talents required to succeed in the job. Special education teachers are required to make a difference for students with special needs and disabilities to allow them to succeed in life outside of school and home. Research shows significant burnout and attrition rates of special education teachers today (Frontline, 2023). A strengths-based model in special education could provide students with the educational support that they need, while providing opportunities for special educators to service the students using their individual strengths while being more engaged in the job.

The qualitative literature review demonstrates positive outcomes aligned with implementing strengths into organizations across multiple industries. Organizations and leadership built around strength-based leadership and task performance has shown to improve employee engagement, productivity, and bottom line results across multiple industries. The literature identifies the requirement for methodical changes in the way that organizations are structured, as well as how training is conducted with leadership and employees to implement strengths programs. Experts in organizational change management clearly identified operational methods and requirements needed to execute major changes in any organization, and education is not an exception to this need.

The Federal laws and the State of Minnesota laws do not indicate that one person must fill the special education requirements in the special education teacher role aligned with IDEA,

and therefore, it appears that a change in the special education service model could be made by the schools assuming that the laws are followed to support students.

Possible Solutions

According to the research, educational leadership could reach out to all educators and ask them what they like to do best and what comes easiest for them in their daily work and vocational responsibilities. They could also consider identifying individuals with strengths including the StrengthsFinder domains of strategic thinking, relationship building, influencing and executing. The educators could be offered the opportunity to take the StrengthsFinder survey to complete a deeper dive into how they can be placed into roles to be most effective and efficient using their strengths and what comes natural and easy to them (Gallup, Inc., 2015).

As identified in the qualitative research, it may be beneficial to understand the part of the special educator role in which the relationship building strengths would be most valuable, such as building relationships with the students and the parents. Educators with strengths in the strategic domain such as Strategic, Developer, and Maximizer might appear to be best at teaching a diverse curriculum. A person with Responsibility as a strength, as well as Deliberative strengths may succeed in helping the collaborative team to set appropriate Individual Education Plan goals (IEP) for the students. An educator with Responsibility and Deliberative strengths may also be successful in understanding and applying state and federal due process laws. The StrengthsFinder data implies that an individual with the Relator theme may not be happy or successful performing paperwork required for due process laws in the current special education teacher role. The educator with an Arranger strength may find satisfaction with the multiple steps required to comply with administrative tasks and due process laws (Gallup Inc., 2015).

The StrengthsFinder tool is most often used to identify a person's top five strengths. Those that dig deeper into the tool offerings learn their full list of 34 strengths in order of preference from most natural, to least natural. The StrengthsFinder coaching theory shares that a person will do their best work when they are actively using their top 10 strengths in a role vs. when a person is required to use strengths that fall closer to the bottom 34 (Gallup, Inc., 2015).

The research data recognizes that the current special education teacher role could be performed by three different people performing pieces of the role today, with the following example:

1. Administration: scheduling meetings, due process paperwork and managing annual and progress reporting requirements.
2. Evaluations: knowledge of norm referenced assessments and state eligibility requirements to determine special education eligibility of students.
3. Teacher: knowledge of research-based differentiated instruction and ability to teach and evaluate daily work of diverse students. Student and parent communication.

Hiring individuals for each of the above different positions with the required elements of the current special education teacher would require strong collaboration and communication for success.

Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, & Reinforcement Model (ADKAR)

If public schools can establish clear change management methodology, changing the special education service model and job descriptions to be structured around strengths-based skilled positions could possibly resolve the challenges of filling jobs in special education. Prior to implementing a change of this magnitude, the ADKAR change management process offers

and advises to use a formal change assessment survey that asks leaders and employees to score each area of change to determine risk factors. The results of the survey provide the organization with the order in which to focus on priorities prior to implementing the change based on what they hear from the employees.

The ADKAR risk assessment asks individuals for a description of the *awareness* of the need to change, as well as the issues that have created a need to change. It also asks for a list of motivating factors or consequences (good or bad) related to the change that impact the *desire* to change, including compelling reasons to support the change and specific objections to the change. The survey asks employees to list the skills and *knowledge* needed for that individual to support the change, both during and after the transition. It further requests information related to employee *ability* to implement the change, along with the challenges and barriers. Finally, the survey asks the respondent to what degree *reinforcements* are in place to support and maintain the change (Prosci, 2023). Understanding employee knowledge aligned with a planned change management strategy enables leaders to successfully guide an organization through change, while minimizing disruption and risk of unexpected consequences (Emerson, 2022). In some cases, more communication is required to support awareness of why a change is needed and how it will affect the employees. In other cases, the survey can provide leaders with information that requires that they bring in more resources that have the expertise to execute and reinforce the change.

Using the ADKAR philosophy, schools could initiate and execute change to the special education service model, as follows (Prosci, 2023, p. 45-49):

Awareness	Build awareness across the special education community related to the inability to fill positions today.
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Desire:	Help current special education leaders and teachers understand what benefits that they will experience with changes, answering: “What is in it for me?”, as well as how the students will benefit from the change. Include educators in the process for developing best practices.
Knowledge:	Provide the methodology, timeline, paid time, and what is expected of each person to accomplish their part in the change process.
Ability:	Provide educators with materials and training to build self-awareness and the ability to communicate their strengths clearly using research based tools, such as Clifton’s Strengthsfinder 2.0.
Reinforcement:	Share and celebrate small and big successes and work through areas of opportunity with educators to ensure that outcomes are achieved as predetermined and communicated. Modify processes as ideas for positive changes are gathered.

Implementation and execution of the ADKAR or another research based organizational change management strategy, would require leadership within the education community to first address the emotional elements of major change and then fully support and model the changes being driven throughout schools. It would require changes in the current job descriptions of special education teachers, and a shift of resources to align with roles after strengths assessment and training is conducted and built with confidence. It would also require that districts allow employees to continue to practice and apply their strengths to their jobs every day, building endurance to make the revised culture stick.

Things to Consider about this Change Model

Understanding elements of each of the researched change approaches shared in this thesis would seem most appropriate for an education system that has operated based on numerous years without exposure to major changes in the role of special education teachers. One should not lose sight of the emotional reactions and responses that a change of this size would initially have on teachers that have been doing the same thing for several years, therefore giving adequate time to manage feelings through change. Additionally, a change of this magnitude would require that outside resources be employed to ensure that it does not adversely affect the already overburdened workload of special education teachers.

This thesis identifies examples using the StrengthsFinder strengths assessment methodology and philosophy, however, it is important to note that other assessment tools may be used to determine employee areas of strengths. What is not currently built into the current educational systems and structure for teachers is time away from the classroom to learn and understand the full range of the significance of a service model change. It is not clear how much physical and mental energy it would take to execute and perfect a structural and operational change to the special education service model. It is possible that an attempt to implement the noted structural and operational changes could be piloted in smaller school districts or charter schools that have a reduced number of special education teachers per school. Piloting a program at smaller schools could be a more flexible and adaptable infrastructure to adopt the required changes to determine feasibility across larger schools and districts.

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

The current state of the education industry position openings across the state depicted in the quantitative research of special education teacher roles not filled in the summer of 2023, provides facts associated with a dire need to attract, hire, motivate, and retain employees. This information, along with the information from Frontline Education regarding why special education teachers quit, displays a sense of urgency for change to secure the future of special education.

When presented with the question of how the special education service-model can be changed to support educator individual strengths, the research identified several perspectives using different processes. Educational institution structures need to be created to first support strengths-based leadership that will model what is needed and in turn promote putting the right people and strengths in special education roles. Educational institutions and leaders would be required to support strengths daily, acknowledging what is working and assisting with ensuring that the employees have the time and training to gain self-awareness and the ability to articulate their strengths. Leadership change will take time and must be in place prior to execution of changing the broad-based roles of special education teachers, possibly splitting the role into numerous roles that fill the need.

The research also identifies multiple models that may help the industry develop a plan to execute the massive change that would be required of the structure and roles of the education system that have been the same since the implementation of IDEA. It is apparent that a planned change of this magnitude would require an organized method and sufficient time to implement to

gain sufficient buy-in and execution across the education community of the required changes needed for success.

Not only is it important for change managers in education to understand how to succeed in change management initiatives of this size, it is equally important to understand the reasons why major changes are not successful. This would require that leadership has a strong understanding of the culture, the employees, and the most effective and efficient ways for them to communicate across the organization. With the current number of responsibilities in the special education role, bringing the employees along the journey with small and big successes, communicating often, as well as acknowledging the challenges, would be crucial for long-term success.

Schools would need to change how special education roles are defined and filled, which may equate to increased employee sustainability, as well as improved results and efficiency needing less human resources because special education teachers will be utilizing their natural talents. Research identifies that special education teachers would need to be self-aware, take the time to identify their strengths, and learn how they can apply those strengths in a new way. It implies that employees would be happier and that there would be less departures from the education field. Schools would benefit with less costs associated with special education departures including a reduction in time and money. Most importantly, without a change in the model, it is putting children with disabilities at risk of not receiving free and appropriate education to live their best lives. Changing the service model may motivate more people to be curious about, and to apply for, special education teaching positions in the future.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

Limitations of the research include understanding how schools could be provided the funding to build strengths-based educational institutions, as well as self-awareness and training on strengths-based leadership and task performance. Minnesota public schools are funded by the State of Minnesota at a set amount per student. Current educational funds are not clearly identified in this research and it was not determined if extra dollars are available for large scale initiatives such as noted in this thesis. Added costs would include StrengthsFinder assessments, or other strengths tools, reporting, and training, communication, as well as the cost for administration to alter special education job descriptions, educate special educators on new roles, and hire special education teachers based on new role requirements.

Additionally, what the research does not identify is the collaboration required if more than one person will support special education students within the guidelines set by IDEA.

IMPLICATIONS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

Additional research is needed to determine if the State of Minnesota Department of Education and the Federal Government would support the added cost and time involved for an organizational, philosophical, and process change of this magnitude in the field of education. History shows that major changes in the education system have been strongly influenced by parents of students with disabilities. Landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Tinker v. Des Moines* and the more recent *Forest Grove School District v. T.A.* have changed education law and how students are treated in school based on their race, religion, disability and more (Thomas, 2019).

Further research is needed to identify in the special education field whether talent strengths and personality traits are balanced across the profession. Talent strengths identify what

talent comes natural to people as they work, while personality traits affect how people show up at work. Although these two characteristics of employees have been evaluated separately in theory and practice, such as StrengthsFinder that identify natural talent, and other assessments that survey personality traits, it is not clear if there are repetitive strengths or personality traits that currently exist in the special education field.

CONCLUSION

The current special education staffing model places most special education teachers in roles that require multiple skills and strengths resulting in burnout. Current special education roles require that teachers understand and stay up to date on state and federal special education laws, evaluate and assess student abilities, create individual education plans, as well as manage behaviors and behavior support plans. They are required to develop and instruct on multiple subjects and research-based curriculums with differentiated instruction, monitor student progress, conduct due process meetings with parents and teams, as well as stay up to date and manage paperwork requirements and deadlines. Given the significant number of open special education teacher positions in Minnesota, the limited number of people available to fill the roles, and the reasons why special education teachers quit, our special needs children are at risk.

The Minnesota Department of Education, as well as public schools, need to evaluate new ideas, processes, and techniques to win over a limited number of individuals in the workforce today. The special education teacher role is one that is currently required to perform at levels too high and broad to succeed without potential burnout or failure. Our children with disabilities need specialized instruction and are at risk. It is time for change in the education system.

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